

Herstory 2.0



Week Six - Opera

It's Opera Week!!!



Opera has been around for over 400 years, and for almost all of these 400 years, it's been written by men, and produced by men.”

Patrick Hansen, Opera McGill

Minute Opera History

Opera began as an experiment

- *stile rappresentivo* or *stilo recitativo* (acting style)
- singing style

Early Court Operas

1. *Dafne* (1598, Florence)
lib. Ottavio Rinuccini; comp. Jacopo Peri
2. *Euridice* (1600, Florence)
lib. Ottavio Rinuccini; comp. Jacopo Peri
3. *Euridice* (1602, Florence)
lib. Ottavio Rinuccini; comp. Giulio Caccini
4. *Orfeo* (1607, Mantua)
lib. Alessandro Striggio; comp. Claudio Monteverdi



**If you're a young innocent woman, or an older
experienced woman, it doesn't matter - you die.
And that seems to be the woman's portrait
experience in opera written by the canon of dead
white men**

Michelle K. Telford

Surtitlist, and Badass Librettist

“When music combined with visual beauty, it served as a double invitation to the pleasures and dangers of love, for body and soul were thus twice besieged and rational man deprived of his physical senses.”

Some contemporary of Francesca Caccini (i.e. 17th century)



"There is always this desire on the part of directors and sometimes male colleagues to try and make Donna Anna not raped. I can't tell you how many directors have decided that Donna Anna wants to be raped by Don Giovanni and is in love with him, even though she has never seen him before. Donna Anna must be some lying, manipulative bitch. I think it is easier than actually asking me what I think or how I see it as a woman."

Megan Marie Hart

“Through veiled “caring” language, I have been removed from shows because of my size. I have been told to my face that if I didn’t lose weight, I couldn’t hope for a career no matter how good a voice I had. I have been offered work contingent on my not gaining more weight. I have been surveyed with a sneer. I have been mocked, judged, passed over, and hurt, simply because my body fat percentage happened to be on the higher side...

“As my father [Richard Margison] has said countless times, ‘why aren’t people in bigger bodies allowed to love and be loved through the operatic lens?’ I echo his question through every fibre of my being. Why, indeed? Somewhere along the line it was decided that a larger body diminishes the believability of a love story. The size of the body has no bearing on the ability to be desired. The size of the body has no bearing on the worth of the human, or their abilities as an artist.

“One of the main reasons I fell in love with opera was due to its portrayal of human emotion, but until all humans are welcomed into that storytelling medium, the honesty is absent.”

Lauren Margison

Opera Canada, May 2021

"I wasn't asked back after my first summer, even though I did an awesome job, because a tenor was stalking me. The company decided to ask him back because they needed tenors, and it was too much drama, so they let him come back and left me in the lurch. I was devastated. I would have loved to come back, but I felt like a failure, and it hurt so much not to be protected."

Erin Elizabeth Smith

A reading from *Sound and Sweet Airs*

Francesca Caccini (1587 - c. 1640)

“Francesca Caccini is one of the very few women who may show up in an index of a book on music history, particularly the history of opera.”

- Father was Giulio Caccini
- Mother was Lucia di Filippo Gagnolandi
 - Had a beautiful singing voice that Francesca is said to have inherited!
- Step-mother was Margherita di Agostino della Scala, a.k.a *Bargiali*
- Had 2 siblings, and 8+ step-siblings
- The entire Caccini family was featured in public performances



Francesca Caccini (1587 - c. 1640)

- Fran's first introduction to the court spectacle was at age 13, October 9, 1600, when the Caccini family singers performed Giulio's *Il rapimento di Cefalo*
- In 1604, King Henry IV and Queen Marie de Medici (France) asked the rulers of Tuscany if they could “borrow” the Caccinis
- When Fran sang, Henry IV declared her the best singer in France!
- Queen Marie was quite keen to “secure Francesca for her own court,” so she was willing to provide “the other sister” (i.e. Settimia) with a dowry



Francesca Caccini (1587 - c. 1640)

- At the beginning of the 17th century, the Medici family (i.e. rulers of Tuscany) was lead by the Grand-Duchess Christine de Lorraine
- She had been married to Grand Duke Ferdinand who became ill and Christine was able to “flex her muscles”
- When he died, and their son Cosimo II succeeded, her power did not wain, as Cosimo had bad health and was confined to bed for months at a time making Christine the de facto leader of the Medici State
- When *he* died, Christine’s daughter-in-law, Arch-Duchess Maria Magdalena of Austria, became principal regent as their son Ferdinand II was only eleven years old
- Francesca was truly in the right place at the right time - a woman composer for what was becoming a woman’s court



Francesca Caccini (1587 - c. 1640)

- Fran's breakthrough composition came in 1607 - a *barriera* - a dance representation of a battle - titled *La stavia*
 - The music does not survive :(
- Scripted by the great-nephew of *the* Michelangelo, Michelangelo Buonarroti
- Christine de Lorraine appointed Fran as *la musica* to the Grand-Duke of Tuscany, November 15, 1607
- Her duties included:
 - Sing as either a solo virtuosa, or *sopra'l libro* (by the book); to sing in ensembles in church, chamber, or theatrical settings
 - Play lute, theorbo, harpsichord, guitar, harp
 - Compose new music and prepare its performance
 - She would compose day in and day out - writing operas in days or weeks!



Francesca Caccini (1587 - c. 1640)

- In 1618 Fran published her first and only volume of arias, *Il primo libro delle musiche* - a book of music written **by** a woman **for** a woman
- It offered examples of every genre a female solo singer needed to master, revealing many tricks of a *musica's* trade
 - Eg. Confidently playing with gender
Ardo infelice - a breathless, desire-filled lament, which is gender neutral
 - How to sing *about* desire without acknowledging any knowledge *of* desire
- By 1623, Francesca was the highest paid musician at court! She earned more than anyone else at court, with the exception of the Duke's secretary



Francesca Caccini (1587 - c. 1640)

La Liberazione di Ruggiero dall'isola Alcina

- *Carnaval* 1625 needed a lavish, and spectacular entertainment, so Maria Magdalena commissions a new work by Fran!
- “For the women rulers of the Medici state, *La Liberazione* stood as a high-risk attempt to confront, head on, the sexually focused, but politically grounded, fears and fantasies that surrounded women in power.”
- This opera will demonstrate the triumph of good over evil, and the immense wealth and power of the Medici family
- Fun bit - the opera ends with a *balletto a cavallo* - a dance with 24 horses and their riders!



Quarantine!!

Francesca Caccini (1587 - c. 1640)

“Every note on every score that Caccini writes offers a challenge to the dominant values of the world beyond Villa Poggio Imperiale. *La Liberazione* is a hard-won triumph.”

Sound and Sweet Airs



Nkeiru Okoye

- Nkeiru's genre-bending compositions reflect a dizzying range of influences - Gilbert & Sullivan, the Gershwins, Sondheim, Copland, gospel, jazz, and Schoenberg.
- "My music doesn't fit easily into a style category.... It's surprising to see how well Schoenberg and funk can sit side-by-side at the symphony." (Nkeiru Okoye)
- Born in New York, NY to an African-American mother, and a Nigerian father
- She spent her early childhood travelling between Nigeria and the U.S., but she was primarily raised in Long Island



Nkeiru Okoye

- As a child she would make up her own songs to the lines in her children's books, like Beatrix Potter
- She was also drawn to the piano
- In school orchestra she played oboe, alto saxophone, and glockenspiel
- At age 13 she entered a composition into the NAACP (National Association of the Advancement of Coloured People) Composition Contest and took first prize!
 - NAACP is a civil rights organization formed in 1909 by W.E.B DuBois, Mary White Ovington, Moorfield Storey, and Ida B. Wells
- In grade 9 she started studying piano at the Manhattan School of Music, Preparatory Division



Nkeiru Okoye

- She holds a Bachelor of Music in Composition from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music
- She also completed additional studies in piano and West African culture
- She also holds a Masters and a PhD in Music Theory & Composition from Rutgers University
 - Studied with Noel DaCosta



Nkeiru Okoye

Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed that Line to Freedom

- Commissioned and produced by American Opera Projects (AOP) with generous support from the National Endowments for the Arts ARTWORKS grant
- Libretto and music by Nkeiru Okoye
- Work was finished in 2012 - eight years after the project began!



Nkeiru Okoye

Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed that Line to Freedom

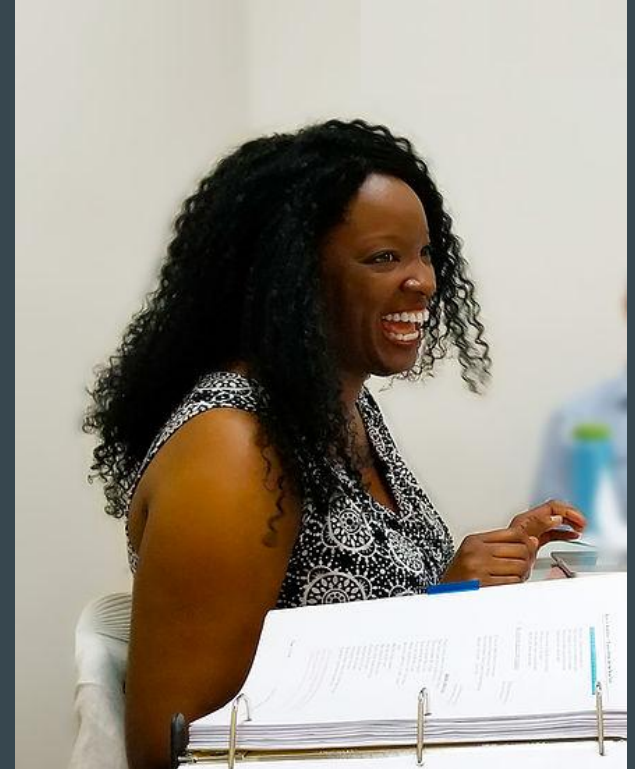
Synopsis:

HARRIET TUBMAN is a two act theatrical work that tells of how a young girl born in slavery, becomes Harriet Tubman, the legendary Underground Railroad conductor. Based on recent Tubman biographies, the story is told in the context of Tubman's tight-knit family of lively characters. HARRIET TUBMAN carries the universal themes of sisterhood, courage, sacrifice and doing what is necessary to keep a family together. Moreover it is a heartwarming tale of two sisters vowing that nothing but death will separate them, despite the slavery threatening to tear them apart.



Nkeiru Okoye

- Song cycle of four arias from the opera, *Songs of Harriet Tubman*
- Nkeiru wanted to tell Harriet's story - why would she risk her freedom going up and down the coast?
- "Often when we talk about Tubman, she's a heroine, but it's not personal - we don't really understand what it cost her to be that way." (Nkeiru Okoye)
- Tubman's repeated dangerous trips to Maryland were prompted by the wish to free members from her extended family



Nkeiru Okoye

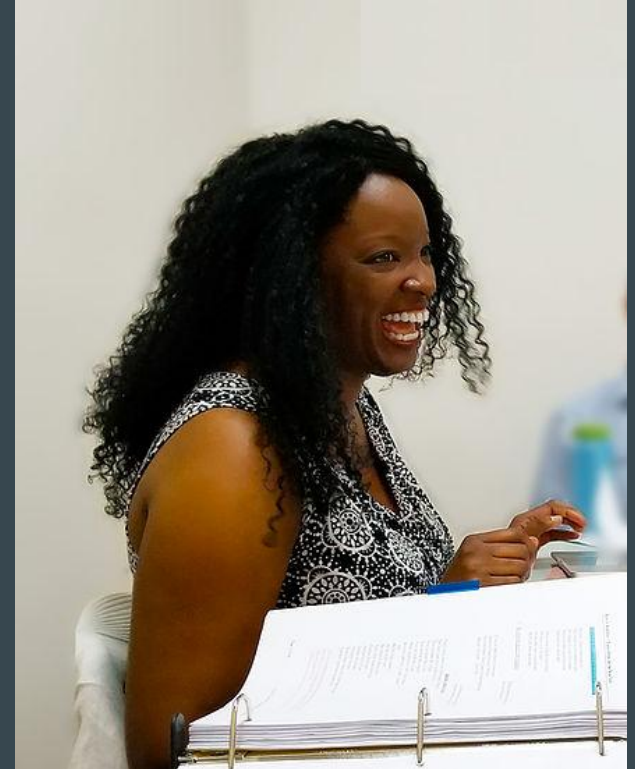
Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed that Line to Freedom

- Included in the opera are forgotten anti-slavery African American heroes like the underground railroad stationmaster, William Still, and the Freedman, Samuel Green - both of whose lives intertwined with Tubman's
- Nkeiru's research also included looking at what kind of music Harriet would have heard; she wanted the opera to be Harriet's music - Harriet wouldn't have sung *bel canto* opera
- Aria: I Am Harriet Tubman, Free Woman



Nkeiru Okoye

- Nkeiru's works have been performed on 5 continents
- She is a musical storyteller, researcher and historian
- Her best-known works incorporate social sciences themes
- She is a music consultant, helping organizations create artistic events that reach and attract diverse audiences
- Nkeiru was the inaugural recipient of the International Florence Price Society's "Florence Price Award for Composition"
- She has received commissions and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, OPERA America, ASCAP, and New York State Commission for the Arts
- She is a board member of Composers Now!



A reading to close Herstory 2.0

Questions?